

# Socio-economic crisis in Venezuela



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## **Abstract**

This research paper investigates the state of Venezuela during a socioeconomic crisis. The initial part of the project outlines the project design and structure. Secondly it describes the historical context that has led to the crisis and guides the readers' understanding of the causes for the crisis. The second part examines how theories by Conflict theory by Karl Marx and Social Stratification by Max Weber can be utilized to deepen the understanding of the crisis. In the third part of the research paper, we present our methodology throughout the paper and state its relevance for our project. Further we will reflect on the results from our data analysis where we have interviewed four Venezuelans in relation to the crisis to help extend our knowledge on the subject. We will be discussing the social classes in Venezuela because of the Bolivarian revolution and conclude that all crises are related to class conflict, and that the Venezuelan crisis has affected the social status of Venezuelans.

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## Introduction

This project intends to investigate what the exodus of the Venezuelan people has meant to the social classes, and how the Venezuelans have been affected by this crisis. Furthermore we will investigate what encouraged the comprehensive migration out of the country. In this project we aim to understand what consequences Hugo Chavez's Bolivarian revolution has had on the Venezuelan people. What impact his policies have had in reshaping the socio economics and class structures in Venezuela. Hugo Chavez had full support of his revolution from the working class who had felt neglected during his predecessor. With the death of Chávez, Venezuela's new leader of government, Nicolas Maduro, inherited a huge task on his hands. An attempt to devalue the Venezuelan Bolivar resulted in one of the most severe hyper-inflation cases in recent history, causing extreme shortages of food and medicine and causing millions of residents fleeing the country (Antonopoulos & Cottle, 2018: 53). During this crisis in Venezuela, poverty has risen to unprecedented levels, and since the reign of Chavez, millions of Venezuelan citizens have had to flee the country in search of a better quality of life. Many have decided to migrate to neighboring countries, mostly Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador. While those with better means settling in Europe or the U.S.A.

Through our research we attempt to understand what symptoms and/or consequences our Venezuelan participants share, if any, between them and their experiences as expatriates abroad, fleeing an uncharacteristic crisis. What do they leave behind? What and how does their affiliation with Venezuela and their new places of residence change or evolve?

Through a series of interviews with four Venezuelan participants we seek to investigate what effects the stream of refugees out of Venezuela has had for the state, and what the crisis has meant for the five million fleeing the country. We aim to conclude that this crisis has changed the way Venezuelans are portrayed by

neighboring countries as well as former citizens who had their views towards Venezuela changed. Formerly, Venezuela was a country where citizens were fervent patriots and proud of their nation. However, with the crisis, the view towards the state has shifted dramatically and the citizens have all but lost faith in their government and their leaders, therefore millions decided to abandon their homeland and migrated to pursue a brighter future. Furthermore, we want to understand how Venezuela went from being one of the wealthiest and well-functioning countries in the region, to the current state where other countries now hold prejudice towards Venezuelans and in many cases view them as unwelcome and undesirable lower social class people.

In our discussion, we will be using the pertinent crisis theory by the influential Karl Marx to investigate if the current state of affairs in Venezuela is, as he indeed argues, that all crises arise from a clash of social classes.

## **Problem Area**

After many years of class struggle in Venezuela under the neoliberal government of the 80's and early 90's the working class finally stood up and started to protest the alleged corruption by the government which led to conflicts such as the Caracazo in 1989 where officially more than 200 people died in the capital Caracas.

The Hugo Chavez led Bolivarian revolution in the mid and late 90's started as a project to enhance the living conditions for the poorer working and rural social class in Venezuela with a modern form of socialism as its root ideology. By uniting the working class, he turned the attention to a new Venezuela where every man should be able to get a share of the vast and rich oil resources and not only the upper middle class. (García-Guadilla et al., 2019)

After an attempted coup d'état in Venezuela in 2002-2004 by the neoliberal opposition Chavez quickly and firmly responded to the opponent favored upper

middle class. As a reply to the strike and coup attempt Chavez went on national television and fired up to 20.000 employees in the oil industry. The dispute came as Chavez had nationalized the oil industry in general as part of his plans of the Bolivarian Revolution so that it was only the main oil company of *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA)* who produced and refined the huge oil reserves. After this he enacted several regulations to the oil industry, as well as the salaries of the employees. Some of those regulations were highly criticized by employees in the oil industry as they felt their expertise was being ignored and the newly implemented regulations for the socialist model made it severely difficult to refine the oil. A mass firing started an exodus from many highly educated employees of the unhappy oil industry which were the start of the middle class, migrating due to the harsh living conditions for this social class that later would prove to be of huge consequence to the Venezuelan economy. (Zea, 2020)

After the collapse of oil prices in 2014 there has been a huge migration from the country due to the many socio-economic failures and the security issues that have happened because of the dependency of oil. This has resulted in an estimated more than 6 million refugees in the past 7 years. (Caraballo-Arias, et al., 2018)

The core idea of dissolving the class struggle of the lower social classes has instead of unifying the classes, provoked a reversed class struggle in which many of the middle and upper class have been determined to be the enemies of the state. This is one of the factors that we found throughout our interviews with middle class Venezuelans to be a defining reason why they chose to flee the country.

By doing several semi-structured in-depth interviews with some of the affected Venezuelans from the oppressed social classes we aim to find an explanation to how the Venezuelan society's social classes have evolved because of the socialist revolution of Chavez and Maduro. By looking at our cases and comparing it to how Marx's theory of class struggle we aim to find an understanding of how the state of the social classes in Venezuela are today.

Furthermore, we would like to investigate how a social crisis like this affects the identity and sociological factors of the migrants that were targeted by the Bolivarian revolution. Through our interviews with different Venezuelans, we have gathered empirical data to gain knowledge about the psychological effects that the crisis has had on them. Their answers have been used to start our theoretical research into topics such as social status and experiences of xenophobia from the countries that they have migrated to.

Through this project we've stumbled upon how a country of such resource rich location could end up in this current situation.

This has led us to the following question:

### **1.1 Research question**

PF: How has the socio- economic crisis and the Bolivarian revolution affected the class structures in Venezuela and how has it caused a shift in the identity of the Venezuelan individuals?

In our aim to find a conclusion for the problem formulation above we have made the following research questions:

1. How does Hugo Chavez's 21st century socialist Bolivarian Revolution deviate from traditional Marxist socialist ideology?
2. How has the idea of 21st century socialism (Bolivarian revolution) reshaped the class struggle in Venezuela, and what economic consequences have developed?
3. In what ways have the migrants' social status and identity been affected because of the crisis in Venezuela?

## **1.2 Project design**

In this chapter we introduce an outline for our research design; in it we include our methodology and choice of theory as well as our qualitative methods employed throughout the process. We begin by introducing our theories, Conflict theory by Karl Marx and Social stratification by Max Weber. As we established in our introduction, we intend to analyze the impact of such a severe socio-economic crisis on the Venezuelan class structures, as well as Venezuelans own perception of the crisis and their identity. We will investigate some of the potential consequences this mass exodus could implicate for the recovery effort of the country. As we looked at the numbers of Venezuelans fleeing the crisis and the multitude of reasons why they do so we looked for theories that would enable us to answer the results we've seen. Additionally, we employed a series of interviews with four Venezuelan expats living abroad and one, at the time of this writing, still residing in Venezuela whilst pursuing options to migrate as soon as possible.

## **1.3 Choice of Theory**

To adequately answer our research question and to put our primary qualitative and empirical data into perspective, we will utilize respectively the class conflict theory of Karl Marx and the theory of social stratification of Max Weber in our report. The theoretical approaches in our report are utilized as we found them inevitably intertwined to the reasons behind the exodus of the Venezuelans and the impact it has had on their identities. Notably, the class conflict theory will serve as a guideline to why the flight of record number of Venezuelans has occurred and to reflect why it has had an extraordinary impact on the economy in the country. On the other hand, the social stratification theory of Max Weber will be utilized to reflect on the issue of identity in Venezuelans living in other countries. Consequently, the theory of stratification is instrumental in analyzing the effects of identity in the Venezuelan people while living outside their place of origin and what, if any, connotations this may have.



## **1.4 Sources**

Our research on the topic has been generated primarily throughout secondary qualitative data but also primary data. The secondary data is gathered through peer-reviewed articles, but also web articles, research papers and government websites. We have predominantly utilized secondary qualitative data in our research that highlights several factors behind the multi-leveled crisis in Venezuela, and to reflect our chosen theories. However, our secondary quantitative data in the project is also important, as it reflects key numbers and statistics in the Venezuelan crisis.

Regarding our primary qualitative data, we have conducted four in depth semi structured interviews, three of which are with expat Venezuelans and the last one with an interviewee who has stayed, for the moment, in Venezuela.

Even though we have predominantly utilized secondary data sources in our research, our primary qualitative data is also instrumental, as it gives an inside understanding of the Venezuelan crisis and its effects experienced by the individuals affected.

## **1.5 Project structure**

In order to adequately portray the structure and procedure of the project report, this chapter provides a briefly descriptive and structural overview of the chapters in our project.

The first chapter serves as a presentation of the field of interest on the topic and the research questions of the report. Furthermore, it serves as an introduction to our theories and sources of data utilized throughout our report.

Our second chapter in the project, will serve as a description of our methodological approach to the project, and explain our methodological considerations.

The third chapter, functions as a descriptive overview of the historical context of the Venezuelan crisis, primarily gathered through peer reviewed articles. The chapter

will serve as a more thorough description of the most important historical events that have led to the crisis in Venezuela and the exodus of Venezuelans.

Our fourth chapter, in the project serves as presentation of the relevant existing literature related to the project subject.

The fifth chapter will serve as a thorough description of our theoretical approaches to the Venezuelan crisis. The chapter will in detail be describing which theoretical approaches we are focusing on, as so it will describe the relevance of these theoretical approaches in order to answer our research questions.

Our sixth chapter will serve as a presentation, with an analytical lens, of our primary qualitative data gathered throughout our four semi-structured interviews.

The project's seventh chapter operates as an analytical discussion of our primary qualitative data and secondary empirical data gathered, through the lens of our theoretical framework.

In the eighth chapter, we draw a conclusion in order to adequately answer our problem formulation and research questions.

The ninth and final chapter of our project report is an overview of our bibliography utilized.

## **Methodology**

This chapter offers an outline of our research design, including explanations of our methodological choices and our empirical sources and choices of theory. It aims to implement the theoretical and methodological findings to adequately portray the structure of the process behind our research.

### **Motivations**

In this part of the project we will introduce the methods of data collection we have used and provide strong argumentation for them. Firstly we are going to describe the

motivations for our project, secondly we will describe the use of our methods in qualitative research and explain their relevance to our problem formulation.

Lastly we will describe why we collected this data, the limitations of our methods and what other methods we could have used.

In the preliminary stages of Basic Project 2, we formed our group as we had a good experience cooperating during the first semester project and therefore decided to work together again. It came naturally to us to cooperate on another project. Given the state of covid-19, Roskilde University was operating online exclusively, and we knew that we would be able to meet up as a group in spite of covid-19. This is also something we came to discover during covid, that we as a group function significantly better in person instead of working online through webcams.

In the early stages of our research we discussed different topics before deciding on the refugee crisis in Venezuela. We all agreed on the subject because we felt puzzled with the shortage of media coverage we saw of this crisis in Denmark as opposed to other crises. Furthermore, the notion that a country such as Venezuela, rich not only in oil reserves but plenty of minerals, fertile agricultural land and a once thriving tourism economy, could have fallen in such disrepair akin to a nation in bellicose conflict cemented our decision to pursue this issue.

After brief research we realized the proportions of the crisis and definitively decided it was interesting for us to conduct a research project revolving around this crisis. The first thoughts we had was how the circumstances in Venezuela could derail to such an extent and who of the Venezuelan citizens that fled the country and who stayed. Since we were interested in understanding the issues the Venezuelan people have experienced during this crisis, we saw it as relevant to investigate what made highly educated citizens move out of Venezuela, and to understand their emotions towards this crisis.

We would argue that our analytical strategy to the project report is inductive, since we started on our analysis from an empirical perspective. Furthermore, did we choose and derive our theories, based on the empirical observations we found gathering our primary qualitative data and through reading existing empirical literature related to our chosen subject (Bitsch and Pedersen, 2019, 115).

To best possibly answer our PF we decided to use qualitative research methods because we wanted to understand the individuals perception of the crisis. So We decided to do four semi structured interviews because we felt it was the best qualitative method to obtain useful answers for our research questions. Semi structured interviews is where the interviewer does not follow a strict set of questions, but where the interviewer has a sheet of open ended questions that can lay ground for a conversation. (Flick, 2019, 230)

Our project is very much grounded on the foundations of social sciences, encompassing a wide berth of sociological issues affecting the Venezuelan population, and as such we deemed it necessary not only to rely on secondary data analysis but to generate primary qualitative data through a series of interviews from Venezuelan expats who have been able to experience many of the consequences generated by the crisis such as unemployment, scarcity, migration, insecurity, etc.

## **Primary qualitative research**

An important factor for us when deciding to use interviews was that we got to investigate the Venezuelan crisis with personal experiences from people who had been affected by it. The interviews were tailored with individual interview guides for the different interviewees. While searching for interviewees we aimed to have as many as possible that we could fit in our time frame. Another priority for our interviewees was that they had to be Venezuelan as our focus was the Venezuelan crisis particularly related to the mass emigration. This is also why three of our four interviewees have moved out of Venezuela, and one is currently staying there. We thought this would benefit the validity of our project as we believed it would give us different perspectives. We connected with the three expat interviewees by recommendation from a mutual friend. We found the fourth interviewee via an independent Venezuelan media where he had written a blog.

Since we were interested in understanding the issues the Venezuelan people have experienced during this crisis, we saw it as relevant to investigate what made highly educated citizens move out of Venezuela, and to understand their emotions towards this crisis.

For the interviews we chose to go for an in depth semi structured interview style as we wanted to highlight the different experiences to different angles of the crisis. Therefore we had separated the interview guide into five different dimensions of the crisis.

The five different sections of our interview guide is:

**Background questions:** To get an idea of the interviewee we were interviewing we needed background information regarding their age, job status, where in Venezuela they came from and their education. This was important to create an idea of what class and status that the interviewee came from.

**Media questions:** As we started out with a focus of how the media portrayed the situation in either Venezuela and from international news outlets we found it interesting to learn how the interviewees felt about this and where they gathered information regarding the situation in Venezuela. As we later on changed our focus to how the past more than 20-years of socialism and class conflict, we still found the answers of this interesting in terms of how the media portrayed the crisis to look into how polarization can be seen in the media. The questions contained questions regarding if the interviewees found the news outlets trustworthy or biased towards who.

**Venezuelan identity and view upon the crisis:** To get an idea of how the interviewees looked upon the current situation in Venezuela and how they felt as a Venezuelan we also chose to ask them about this. Questions about what they feel are the most pressing issues or who/what they blame for the current situation. Furthermore we wanted to know if they had any hopes of returning to Venezuela in the future and what it would take to consider that.

**Involvement of foreign countries:** As we also had an interest in knowing if they had any experience or knowledge towards if they felt that foreign involvement in the crisis had any influence in everyday life. Here we asked whether they were aware of the involvement of China and the USA. In this dimension we also wanted to know how and if they felt that the foreign involvement was necessary for the country to change or evolve from the current state.

**Personal experiences of the Bolivarian revolution:** As we found the Bolivarian revolution and 21st century socialism as important terms regarding the modern history of Venezuela we wanted to hear from our interviewees about their experiences and feelings towards Chavez and Maduro.

In the analysis of our data, we used thematic coding because there were certain topics we focused on when we wrote the interview guides. We felt it was the best method of analysis so we could investigate what challenges their identity and social status had faced. We have extracted our data through the six steps in the concept of thematic analysis where we initially have transcribed and read our interviews. (Flick, 2019, 475) Secondly we developed codes while reading through the material we had from our interviews. We started by using open coding to see if there were codes repeated in our different interviews and understand if there were relations between the answers we had. Thirdly, we used thematic coding on each of the interviews to discover relevant themes, domains and categories for the single case. Everytime we found something relevant to our analysis we assigned it with a code to structure our data for the analysis. Fourthly, after we coded the four interviews we sat down and looked through the codes to categorize them into themes. In this step of our thematic coding we decided on two major themes, *Identity* and *Class stratification*.

While we thought each of these two themes were suited for our analysis, we found them too broad and used more specific subthemes to categorize within the two themes. This was the fifth step of the thematic analysis where we amended our themes to ensure relations between the themes and the codes. The relevant sub themes for Identity were; *Safety, Hopelessness, Mental fatigue and Alienation*. The

other theme we decided on was Class stratification. The relevant sub themes drawn from our codes were: *Government vs opposition, Private vs public, Polarization, Scarcity, Inadequate leadership and Media access*. In our choice of theory, we found relevant theories after coding our qualitative data. In the sixth and final step of our thematic analysis is writing up the analysis. We wrote the analysis theme by theme and described how often the themes were mentioned in the data. In the analysis we used citations from our interviews to strengthen our arguments. In the end of the analysis there is a conclusion that describes the most important takeaways from our data and answers our research question. Thematic coding is particularly relevant to answer our problem formulation because our problem formulation focuses on patterns and factors that come to play in describing this crisis. We found it relevant because we were able to thematize the challenges the state of Venezuela had faced as well as the challenges the individuals have faced. The themes we extracted from the data related to the expectations we had in the research questions.

## **Secondary qualitative research**

Besides using interviews in our data collection, we have also systematically searched for and analyzed peer-reviewed pre-existing data on the subject. The use of secondary data has also been instrumental for our knowledge and our incentives for this project. Deriving knowledge from existing empirical data has helped us be inspired to conduct our own research question and produce an academic research project that strengthens the state of research in the field. Reviewing the empirical literature helps understand the current state of affairs within a given context and it helps us ask ourselves the question: *Do any surprising findings exist in this field which call for a new study?* (Flick, 2019, 153) We found out that while there was much data regarding Venezuela and Chavez, there was no or little empirical data that tried to explain the crisis with Marx' class conflict or Weber's Social Stratification. In our secondary qualitative research we have written a state of the art section. State of the art means a literature review and refers to the best and most recently available research in a field. Writing a state of the art commonly strengthens the researchers' knowledge and perspectives in the field. After a state of the art it becomes easier to

develop relevant theories and implement them on the primary and secondary data respectively from our interviews and from our empirical literature review. In our state of the art section we will be describing the current state of the research and portray its relevance to our project.

## **Secondary quantitative research**

To avoid solely relying on qualitative data, we researched for secondary quantitative data to explain relevant factors in our project. Here we specifically have focused on the increasing crime rate in Venezuela. We wanted to gather our own quantitative data by the use of questionnaires or similar, but we realized that would be too time consuming as we did four qualitative interviews. As opposed to interviews, the use of questionnaires would be able to give us a more comprehensive result of data and generalize from the answers. Unfortunately, it was too difficult for us to have that many people participate in our project as it also was rather difficult to get in touch with Venezuelans. We wanted to use mixed methods to achieve triangulation and thereby a more valid research project. If we had found a specific focus in the Venezuelan crisis sooner, we might have been able to use both primary quantitative and primary qualitative methods, but in this project among other things, there was not enough time, which led us to use secondary data.

## **Limitations**

In the use of a qualitative method conducting semi structured interviews we found a few drawbacks of this framework. Firstly, having four interviews with interviewees in different countries was very time consuming for us. We realize that we have interviewed on a sensitive subject and that certain questions could have less truth because of the influence of the presence of an interviewer. We explained that we had no bias or inclinations with these interviews, and that we wanted our interviewees to be as honest as possible. An issue we found with having the interviews online, was that it was difficult for us to assess emotions. We wanted to differentiate between semantic and latent codes, but as we did the interviews online,



it was difficult for us to identify any latent codes as they are more reflected in the interviewee's behavior and emotions when asked certain questions.

As we had conducted four interviews and we were four members in our project group, we divided the interviews one for each, and then we coded them individually before coding them all together. This saved us some time as we could do faster read through and thematizing of the codes.

While we believe that we achieved triangulation, there are also some disadvantages of using mixed methods. If the answers from quantitative research do not correlate with the answers from the qualitative research it jeopardizes the trustworthiness of the project which is a great disadvantage of using mixed methods. That is another reason we decided to use secondary quantitative data to compare to our qualitative data. (Flick. 2019, 200) There are also other limitations by using mixed methods even though it typically grants more validity to the project. In case the qualitative and quantitative data collide, it can be very difficult to compare qualitative and quantitative data, as the qualitative data commonly is more nuanced and individual where in quantitative it is often important that the people asked, should answer something general that can be closely tied to other answers.

We have mostly focused on the socio economic aspect of this crisis because primarily we wanted to investigate the social classes. While we have done this, we still acknowledge that other aspects of the crisis in Venezuela have had less value in this particular research project.

## **Historical context**

### **Aftermath of the first oil crisis and Caracazo**

Venezuela has since the discovery of the vast oil reserves in the late 1970s had a turbulent economical history. What started out as a huge boom in growth and wealth for the country gave cause for worries as a world oil crisis hit. In 1989 falling oil prices caused austerity in Venezuela and riots started. The neoliberal president therefore had to make several macroeconomic adaptations to try to get out of the situation. (García-Guadilla et al., 2019)

Those adjustments created an uproar in the working class and started many protests against the government. Most famously is the Caracazo where, depending on the sources, as the number has been corrected through years, up to 396 killed by the police or security forces in the capital. (Maya, 2003)

This put the president at that time, Carlos Andrés Pérez, under a lot of pressure from the public in the years to follow. After the Caracazo riots oil prices started increasing again but the discontent of lower social classes continued and both peaceful and violent protests against the government were a common sight in the country.

In 1992 the military got involved as their frustration grew due to decline in salaries that resulted in officers only making 10% of the wage that an officer received 10 years before. (Trinkunas, 2005, 157)

All these tensions and frustrations throughout the country led to an attempt to coup the power in February 1992. The coup was orchestrated by a regiment in the military under the lieutenant Hugo Chavez Frias. President Pérez managed to escape his presidential residence before the rebels overtook it and he fled to a local television broadcasting center. Through this he could address the nation and order those who rebelled to surrender. Afterwards he and his minister of defense, General Fernando Ochoa Antich, located troops that were loyal to the administration and made them counterattack the rebels successfully. (Trinkunas, 2005, 156) Chávez surrendered and was arrested and imprisoned.

Even though the president had survived the attempted coup he was still under a lot of pressure due to the economic conditions in the country. Because of the poor handling of the economic factors that caused hyperinflation, steady recession, devaluation of the currency and deterioration of public services he finally was impeached and taken of power in 1993. The new president elected was Rafael Caldera. (Trinkunas, 2005, 158)

In 1994 president Caldera pardoned Hugo Chavez for his part in the coup after political pressure on his party due to the poor handling of office by former president Pérez. (Ibid.)

Chavez had used his time in prison to regroup with his fellow revolutionaries from his Bolivarian Revolution Movement 200 also called MBR 200. (Hawkins, 2010, 17)

When he and his companions were pardoned by Rafael Caldera they began planning a less dramatic takeover of power by forming an actual political party which was made in 1997. Chavez had seen how the rising popularity of his cause had spread through the middle class and lower social classes and this he used as an opportunity to change the Venezuelan constitution as a democratic revolution from the inside of government to eradicate corruption from the upper class. (Hawkins, 2010, p 17)

## Rewriting the constitution

During the 1970's Venezuela was a wealthy country benefiting from the greatest oil reserves in the world and other valuable minerals. In the late 1980's Venezuela found difficulties in relying so heavily on oil and minerals because the price on oil dropped and because all of the oil was controlled by the state. It meant production had to be increased in order to cover some of the loss. Venezuela did not manage properly through this which ultimately led to the election of socialist Hugo Chavez in 1998 who had promised to be the leader of the people. Shortly after his inauguration in December 1998 he decided to schedule a rewrite of the Venezuelan constitution, just a month after his suggestion was favored by the court which was a very controversial decision with the people. The referendum vote gave Chavez a 92% majority, however with an abstention rate of 63%. (Wilpert, 2003). Two months later there was a vote for the general assembly which resulted in 95% of the 125 members of the assembly being allies of Chavez' and only 6 members in total were from the opposition. (Wilpert, 2003) Chavez had gotten full access to have the constitution rewritten. The constitution of 1961 was underdeveloped which Chavez used to enforce new laws and systems, where some would benefit the people and human rights while others would benefit his regime. He changed the presidential term from five to six years and made it possible to be reelected straight after a six-year term. Previously the president could not run twice without a break between periods. (Wilpert, 2003)

## Military Coup and Oil Strike

In April 2002, Chavez wanted to make the governmental oil company PDVSA the main funding for his political campaign. On his mission he had to replace the executives of PDVSA with his political allies to eject any supporters of the opposition. Chavez had no problem with mocking the former oil experts and executives on national television as he inaugurated his friends and allies. This made some Venezuelans view him negatively which helped the leader of the opposition to organize a riot with more than a million participants. One of the leaders of the opposition directed the mass towards the presidential palace where Chavez was removed from office for nearly two days before military and loyalists overcame the opposition and had him reinstated. (Seabra, 2016)

In 2003 a strike for all 18000 laborers of PDVSA was organized by the opposition. The strike took place in February and Chavez used his powers and fired them all which is what led to the severe brain drain in Venezuela. (Seabra, 2016) The crisis in Venezuela is often connected to the phenomenon Brain drain. Brain drain is a term from the 1960s which means 'the loss of talented people from one area to another. (Garcia Zea, 2019) Talented people is a reference to professionals and educated people who move countries to increase their quality of life.

Under the circumstances Venezuela has faced since the inauguration of Chavez in 1998, a way to understand brain drain is as pull & push (Requena et Caputo, 2016). The pull is represented by the favorable work and life conditions other countries can offer, and the push effect is the increasingly visible tyrannical form of government Chavez has laid down which many Venezuelan citizens came to discover in 2003. The brain drain Chavez caused in 2002/2003 still influences the Venezuelan economy and most of the Multinational corporations with headquarters in western countries or Asia, who had business in Venezuela have withdrawn themselves to other countries with less inflation and price controls (Garcia Zea, 2019) The exodus of Venezuela's higher educated population was motivated by the questionable policies led by Chavez and the socialist regime. The Venezuelans who have fled or

moved to another country are turning their backs on the socialist regime led by Chavez.

## United States and foreign relations

The policies Chavez has enforced have had fatal consequences for Venezuela's productions and its GDP. (Garcia Zea, 2019) In 1998, the United State Drug Enforcement Administration indicted 4 Venezuelan banks in what was the largest money laundering scheme in U.S. history. This upset Hugo Chavez who responded immediately. He had the DEA removed from Venezuela as he saw it as a threat to their national sovereignty. In 2005, Washington D.C. claimed several of Hugo Chavez' elected officials had taken a part in fanning the industry of drugs, and that his cutting ties with the DEA helped drug trafficking out of Venezuela. He was also accused of not taking responsibility for corrupt police officers who had helped the small, but influential drug lords. (Oliver, 2007) The relationship between Hugo Chavez' Venezuela and The United States was further weakened. Chavez had to build relations with a more powerful state to counter The United States, and Russia was the strongest opposition at the time. Russia would also benefit from cooperation with Venezuela as they would have influence in the Americas. In 2006, President Hugo Chavez initiated a 2-billion-dollar arms deal with Russia as he wanted to ensure armed protection from the U.S. In this period the waves went high between Chavez and Washington D.C. He claimed that D.C. initiated and backed the 2002 military coup, and while the Bush-government and Russia were on bad terms, Chavez saw an opportunity to strengthen the relationship with their strongest ally, Russia who they shared an enemy with in The United States. The arms deal between Venezuela and Russia included for Russia to gain a greater position in Venezuela and access to more natural resources and for Venezuela to internationally recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states (Blank, 2015).

## China's influence in Venezuela

In the year of 2007 another great economic superpower found interest in Venezuela and its natural resources, China. In the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China experienced an industrialization boom, which increased their possibilities to interfere in other parts of the world. At the same time did the former Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez find advantages in a diplomatic and oil collaboration between the two states (Matt Ferchen, 2020, 1).

The strategic partnership resulted in huge state-to-state loans from China to Venezuela, starting with a 4 billion USD loan in November 2007 and topping in August 2010 with a 20,3 billion USD loan. The Chinese invested a total of 50,991 billion USD, summed up in the period from November 2007 to November 2013 (The Dialogue, 2020).

The huge investments in Venezuela became China's largest energy financial investments in any other country at the time. In the wake of the significant loans distributed by China, Venezuela became very reliant on the Chinese loans. The loans resulting in Venezuela became responsible for the largest debt to China, from any foreign nation (Matt Ferchen, 2020, 6).

The state of the relationship between Venezuela and China slightly changed in 2014 in the wake of the 2014 oil crisis and the worsening economic and political situation in Venezuela. China decreased their amount of state-to-state loans to Venezuela and changed their strategic approach as they only offered Venezuela loans for oil related projects (Rosales, 2018).

In the year of 2015 China did not find the same interest in Venezuela anymore as the state of Venezuela worsened, as did China stall their investments in Venezuela and at the same time China increased their loans to Brazil to maintain the geopolitical threshold in the American continent (ibid.).

## Death of Hugo Chavez and Venezuelan presidential election

The structure of the political situation in Venezuela changed in 2013, as the former president of Venezuela, Hugo Chavez died of cancer on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 2013. The death of Chavez led to the Venezuelan presidential election on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April 2013.

The election turned in favor of the former Venezuelan Vice President and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nicolas Maduro.

Despite Maduro officially winning the election with approximately 2 percent, the candidate of the opposition, Henrique Capriles, did not accept the decision and called out for a full audit while he cheered his supporters to go to the streets and protest, which resulted in riots and several deaths (MacLeod, 2020).

A lot of different perspectives on the presidential election got portrayed in different media outlets. An ongoing theme, especially in western media, was that the presidential election got highly accused of fraud. Notably did media from the US accuse the election to be fraud as 76 out of 82 US newspapers deemed the election not clean (Ibid.).

As a consequence of the decreasing interest from China and the drop in oil prices, the humanitarian situation in Venezuela worsened. The aggravating state in Venezuela, combined with the uncertainty of possible fraud in the presidential election caused increased dissatisfaction among the Venezuelan population.

As a result of the increased tension in the population, anti-government groups went to the streets in November 2014 to demonstrate against the president Nicolas Maduro. The demonstrations got known as the 2014 Guarimbas and led to violent disorders on the streets of Caracas. The marches were led by the opposition politician Leopoldo Lopez, and the street clashes resulted in a total of 43 people getting killed (Ibid.).

## US sanctions on Venezuela

As a reaction to the violent 2014 Guarimbas protests, Barack Obama the president of the United States of America signed the Defense of Human Rights and Civil Society Act of 2014, on the 18<sup>th</sup> of December 2014 (Office of the Press Secretary, 2015). The new legal act made it possible for the United States to impose sanctions on Venezuelan individuals. With the addition of the new legal act, Barack Obama on the 9<sup>th</sup> of March, issued a new executive order declaring Venezuela as a national security threat to the United States (Ibid.)

Throughout the executive order the United States imposed sanctions on seven individuals from Venezuela, including Antonio José Benavides Torres, the Commander of the Strategic Region for the Integral Defense and Manuel Eduardo Pérez Urdaneta the Director of Venezuela's Bolivarian National Police (Ibid.).

The sanctions on the seven Venezuelan individuals implied that they would have their property and interest in property in the United States blocked or frozen and blocked all US citizens from doing business with the seven individuals. Furthermore, did the seven individuals get denied entry to the US (ibid.).

## **State of the art**

When looking at what other academics have been investigating and discussing with the focus of Venezuela and the situation that they find themselves in, we have especially investigated three different topics/discussions. Those three are what we found as some of the core discussions of how the country ended up in such a critical state and what is of the most importance to the social class struggle of Venezuela.

### **21st century socialism and polarization**

One of the factors to the crisis is to be found in the polarized relations between the different social classes many argue (García-Guadilla et al., 2019). Due to the populist way that Chavez grounded his 21st century socialism and Bolivarian revolution to unify the poor working class of the 90's he ended up splitting the country into two in every important matter which the mal-administered government of Maduro furthermore has escalated by overtaking the important democratic institutions of Venezuela.

For example, we have found that there is the working class vs. the upper middle class and high class or the proletariat vs. the bourgeois. Another polarized picture that we found in our research and data collection is that of the private vs. the public and a core ideology discussion on either direct participant democracy or more liberal representative democracy.



As Margarita López Maya describes Chavez way of characterizing his opponents:

*“True to the tendency of every charismatic leader, Chavez tended to criminalize his political opponents. Earlier in his discourse, he depicted the opposition leaders and/or parties as ‘enemies’ or ‘traitors’ and later, in his government’s socialist phase, he referred to them in terms of ‘bourgeois’ and ‘agents of imperialism’.”* (Maya, 2018, 69)

By doing this he creates this discourse of us and them with rhetoric that diminishes the opponent as the ones using the poorer class of voters that Chavez was seeking.

Maya furthermore argues how the Chavez way of style that were mostly influenced by his charismatics were from the change to present president Nicolas Maduro exchanged with a more dominant form of ruling that she refers to as neopatrimonialism domination. By using those terms, she refers to the concept of Max Weber’s forms of authority which he described in his classic book Economy and society from 1922. (Ibid.)

She argues that Maduro's lack of charisma has made the voter class of Chavez tend to turn on him by which he has had to turn to even more drastically dominant leadership by militarizing the power and using more authoritarian rulership. (Ibid.)

In the article of Giraudy et al. (2020) they conclude that when neopatrimonialism has happened and happens in Latin American, they tend to have non sustainable social and poverty alleviation programs which is the example of Venezuela who through the 2000’s and 2010’s has experienced a higher level of neopatrimonialism.

Manuel Larrabure analyzed the idea and realization of the 21st century socialism in Venezuela and comes to the conclusion that even though the ideology behind the movement is very honorable and has the idea of eradicating the class struggle in the country it has instead made the classes even more polarized in terms of being to favorable towards one class. As well, the corruption and state bureaucracy make the theory and revolution behind the ideology vanish in reality as it keeps the struggles from the former “flawed” democracy that is intended to be improved by this new socialism. (Larrabure, 2014)

Garcia-Guadilla et al. (2019) also comes to the conclusion that the polarization in Venezuela is a result of an ideological dispute between the popular class of the poor and rural citizens favor of protagonist participatory democracy which Chavez implemented and the old representative democracy that of the neoliberal opposition and middle to upper class favored.

## Democracy or autocracy?

The socialist way that Chavez reformed the country to a participatory democracy in his change of the Venezuelan constitution in 1999 (The Bolivarian constitution) was through the thought of including the excluded popular lower social classes. This combined with the populist discourse of Chavez after the attempted coup d'etat in 2002 the social classes that supported the opposition began to be described as the enemy which started a polarization between *Chavistas* and pro-opposition (Garcia-Guadilla et al., 2019; Bull & Rosales, 2020).

This started a more authoritarian rule of the country in favor of the voter class of the left. Chavez' charisma and the use of very pro working-class policies, he was able to hold the popular voter scare close to him. (Bull & Rosales, 2020)

Maduro hasn't had the same connection to his voters as Chavez did due to the different forms of rulership as described before. Because of this, combined with the economical situation and the lower oil prices, he has had to shift to an even more government controlled state. By pleasing the military and keeping them close as well as changing the most important democratic institutions and the judicial system he now almost controls the whole system as he only has favored members in the national assembly with the opposition being in exile. (Bull & Rosales, 2020; Gan, 2020)

*“Particularly under President Maduro, most public policies are directed to include only those popular sectors allied ideologically with the government. Those not allied are excluded due to the scarcity of resources to feed populism. The middle and upper classes, who are associated with the opposition, are also excluded and*

*considered not as a political adversary, but as the enemy to be eradicated through authoritarian decrees.” (Garcia-Guadilla et al., 2019, 74)*

In terms of how to communicate, the governments of Chavez and Maduro also used authoritarian moves to silence their opponents by shutting down opposition friendly media like RCTV and making state media instead show how they could control the rhetoric of the people (Garcia-Guadilla et al., 2019). They ended up having control of almost 64% of the television channels and made programs like *Álo Presidente* in which Chavez famously held hour long speeches every Sunday (de la Torre, 2017).

The arguments of Venezuela being a very flawed democracy tending to autocracy is underlined by the poor score that the organization of Freedomhouse gave of only 14/100 and therefore labelled Venezuela as an unfree country (Freedomhouse, 2020).

## **Theoretical framework**

### **Class conflict - Karl Marx**

As the Venezuelan crisis is an issue deeply rooted in the economical aspects of sociology with consequences going beyond economics we believed it necessary to approach our research through a study of class conflict and social struggles, as we theorize this phenomenon is one of the main catalysts in the ongoing conflict in Venezuela. As Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels state in *The Communist Manifesto*; “the history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles”(Marx & Engels, 2010, 1). So we decided to analyze whatever aspects in Venezuelan society we deemed relevant and influenced by class conflicts throughout Venezuela's latest developments.

Marx saw economic conflict in society as the primary means of change. The base of each type of society in history—its economic mode of production—had its own characteristic form of economic struggle. This was because a mode of production

was essentially two things: the means of production of a society—anything that is used in production to satisfy needs and maintain existence (e.g., land, animals, tools, machinery, factories, etc.)—and the relations of production of a society—the division of society into economic *classes* (Little, McGivern, 2014)

Proponents of Karl Marx's class conflict theory argue that an economic system consists of two main classes, the capitalist, who possesses all means of production, and the working class, who possesses nothing but their labor force—the working class (Assous & Antonin, 2018, 1096). Consequently, a system and class -capitalism and bourgeois- dependent upon the inherent inequalities of the system that support it cannot but inevitably lead to a class conflict with the proletariat—the working class. A constant struggle that has continued to develop since ancient times between the haves and the have nots. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another carried on an uninterrupted now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended either on a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large or in the common ruin of the contending classes. (Marx, Engels, 2010, 1).

That is in essence, the nature of Marx's view on a constant class conflict; society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two hostile camps, into two great classes, directly facing each other: bourgeoisie and proletariat. (Ibid., 2).

### **Max Weber – Social Stratification**

To reflect the consequences for the identity of the expat Venezuelans, we seek to utilize the explanation of the theory of Social Stratification by Max Weber, and especially his addition of social status to the explanation of structural power.

In terms of explaining and understanding the structures of power, Max Weber stated that power can not only be deduced throughout economics (Weber, 1946). To adequately portray the structures of power, Weber built his theory as an addition to the Social Class theory of Karl Marx. However, Weber had a different perception of the class structure and interpreted the term class as referring "...to any group of people that is found in the same class situation." (Ibid., 181). In its place Weber

stated that there are three types of structural power, labeled as; social class, status class and party class. The social class, explained similarly to Karl Marx, that the class is economically based, the status class represented by honor and prestige and the party class represented by the power the individual exercises (Pyakuryal, 2001: 15).

Weber argued that it was necessary to distinguish between the different classes in order to adequately portray structural power:

“In contrast to the purely economically determined 'class situation' we wish to designate as 'status situation' every typical component, of the life fate of men that is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of honor. This honor may be connected with any quality shared by a plurality, and, of course, it can be knit to a class situation” (Weber, 1946, 186-187).

According to Weber, there is a distinction of power, related to honor in a variety of situations. To exemplify the difference between social class and status class, Weber argues that:

“The 'equality' of status among the American 'gentlemen,' for instance, is expressed by the fact that outside the subordination determined by the different functions of 'business,' it would be considered strictly repugnant—wherever the old tradition still prevails—if even the richest 'chief,' while playing billiards or cards in his club in the evening, would not treat his 'clerk' as in every sense fully his equal in birthright.” (Ibid., 187).

Weber states in this example, that however the two individuals have different social classes and serve different functions in the given environment, they are still treated with equal respect and honor, due to their social statuses in the given environment. Furthermore, if the individual of the higher social class would refuse to show respect and honor to the individual of the lower social class, it would be regarded as an act of dishonor, which would reduce his social status as an American 'gentleman' (Ibid.,187).

One of the most evident cases of status segregation, according to Weber, is the distinctions of ethnicities and caste (Ibid.:188). Weber states that the distinction of social status among individuals in a society reaches an extreme level, when there are ethnic differences in the society. The fact that there are people with diverse cultural backgrounds in a society, forms different status groups, where they typically regard themselves as belonging to the higher social status (Ibid., 189).

In terms of the caste segregation, Weber states that it is the common way to distinguish between social statuses, in a society where there is less ethnic diversity among the social groups in the society (Ibid., 189). In the different examples given by Weber on the differentiation between the different classes, it is arguably connectable to the present situation of the expat Venezuelans identity being affected by the crisis.

## Results of data analysis

In this chapter of our project we will be presenting a framework of thematic observations gathered through our primary qualitative data. We found two comprehensive themes and ten sub-themes through thematic coding of our semi-structured interviews conducted. The themes we found through the interviews, will be labeled as *Identity* and *Class-stratification*. The sub-themes for *Identity* are labeled as; *Safety*, *Hopelessness*, *Mental Fatigue* and *Alienation*. The sub-themes for *Class-stratification* are labeled as followed; *Government VS Opposition*, *Private VS Public*, *Polarization*, *Scarcity*, *Inadequate Leadership* and *Media Access*.

### Safety

In terms of the safety-net in Venezuela, it was an ongoing theme in the interviews. The interviewees had a common conception of safety as a severe problem in the country. The safety issue, according to the interviewees, is the most comprehensive problem in Venezuela at the moment, and in terms of the expat interviewees the primary reason for their exodus, which is evident in statements such as: “*I came somewhere else to survive*” (Andrea, p.9, l.22) and “*health reasons , I began to*

*suffer panic attacks I needed medication. I didn't think it was the right way to live, that was the catalyst.” (Lorena, p.1, l.18).*

In addition the safety sub-theme was one of the most common themes mentioned throughout the four interviews. The relevance of the issue was highlighted in the usage of terms such as; safety, security, violence, fear and health.

A contributive concern to the theme safety, where the ongoing pandemic and the health issues related to the pandemic. It is indicated in the interviews, that the covid-19 pandemic is a huge present issue in Venezuela, as the general state of health-care in Venezuela is almost nonexistent, as that contributes to the concern of safety: *“...the fact that your parents are home in Venezuela, that makes it very difficult because you don't know if they're going to be okay. The health system in Venezuela, it doesn't exist practically.” (Andrea, p.4, l.25).* This statement from the expat Andrea underlines the issue, furthermore aligned with the impression from Jose who still lives in Venezuela: *“I worry about my parents and covid, my father is eighty five and my mom is sixty five. I don't know when they are going to get vaccinated, and if they are being prioritized (Jose, p.5, l.37).* Through the different interviews it was clear that the safety in terms of different factors is an important issue for the Venezuelans.

## **Hopelessness**

Another key factor pointed out through the interviews was the essence of hopelessness. The different interviewees had commonly given up on the situation in the country. Statements from the interviewees addresses the lack of hope among the interviewees but also their Venezuelan acquaintances, which is evident through statements such as: *“I think I have become very maybe hopeless is the word, I don't trust in the government, but I also don't trust the opposition.” (Desiree, p.6, l.35)* and *“I think the overall feeling of the people it's just a resignation. I feel it also from my family.” (Lorena, p.4, l.40).*

Some of the key terms used by the interviewees related to the sub-theme hopelessness, was; frustration, hopelessness and the usage of don't in their statements.

In the interviews it also was evident that the persisting crisis, and the several different factors of insecurity related to the crisis, has minimized their faith in having

a future living in Venezuela. The lack of hope related to a progressive Venezuela is according to the interviewees a decisive reason for the exodus of Venezuelans: “It's very draining and this is why, even though I have my parents to take care of now, but I keep thinking about leaving the country, because if you don't, you don't see any light at the end of the tunnel.” (Jose, p.6, l.19). It became very clear that the lack of hope among the interviewees were similar, and the interviewees notably had a common conception of having no future if they were to live in Venezuela. One very clear example of this was given by Andrea explaining why she left the country: “...then we had a joke that all of us in the group of my friends would all meet again at the funeral of another friend... So then I thought, OK, what do I do, do I stay here and wait until it's my turn or do I leave?” (Andrea, p.2, l.24).

## **Mental Fatigue**

Interconnected with the lack of hope, were the mental fatigue of the interviewees very evident. Similar patterns from the interview made it very clear that the interviewees commonly were very tired of following the state of Venezuela, especially the political sphere of Venezuela. Notably from the interviews were that the interviewees not only had common notions on it, but also expressed that it was a common conception among the Venezuelan people in general: “Every single person is exhausted of all of this political confrontation, of these political lies everywhere, corruption, everyone.” (Jose, p.7, l.25).

Some of the terms that were repeatedly used underlined the relevance of the sub-theme of mental fatigue, such as; Exhausted, tired, stressed, fed up and too much. Among the expat interviewees it also became clear that they commonly tried to abstain from reading Venezuelan related news, as it was exhausting them too much. As the expats all fled the country in the hope of gaining a life under better circumstances, they all tried to limit their attention to the state of the Venezuelan crisis: “...I mean, I still follow it, of course. But about three years ago? I just decided to not do it so much because it was just messing with my head, I think, like it was way too much for me.” (Desiree, p.2, l.32). Commonly among the expats interviewees they all still had family living in Venezuela, and by that they felt obligated to follow the state of Venezuela, despite feeling fed up about it: “Even though I find it interesting following the daily situation, I try not to do it, because it's



very hard for me. But I do need to know what is happening there because my family is there and directly or indirectly it affects me.” (Lorena, p.1, l.37)

## **Alienation**

Additionally, another sub-theme derived from the conducted interviews was the alienation of the Venezuelan people. One of the most notably pressing side effects of the Venezuelan crisis, especially for the expat interviewees, were that the huge exodus of Venezuelans has separated the Venezuelan people and families.

In relation to deriving Alienation as a sub-theme, there were patterns of terms used by the interviewees, like; alone, apart, spread out, and all over.

The expat interviewees, when asked about their thoughts of possible long-term effects of the crisis, commonly saw the alienation of the people as the greatest for themselves. As the alienation of the Venezuelan people, according to the interviewees, has several effects on the identity of the Venezuelans; “Socially, I think it would have on the long term a very negative effect because we are apart from everything that is known to us as home... Socially that will have an effect in the long run, I mean, you grow up outside of the family and then all of a sudden you don't recognize yourself anymore as a Venezuelan” (Andrea, p.8, l.35).

Andrea stated that the separation of the Venezuelan people will affect the identity of the individuals socially, as they grow up without the traditions of a Venezuelan family, and thereby will be difficult to maintain. Another eye-catching factor regarding the alienation of the Venezuelan people, is the side effects of being a Venezuelan in a foreign country. The Venezuelan crisis, and the mass exodus of the Venezuelans, have caused a shift in how they are regarded by other countries. As there are a lot of people moving to other countries, some of the people are criminals and that affects the way their neighboring countries look at them. Andrea states that she has experienced a different behavior towards her, when visiting other South American countries; “I think we are now seen as a horrible country in all of South America... people ask me sometimes like, oh, where are you from? And I'm like, I'm a bit hesitant to say Venezuela, because we're seeing, like, these horrible immigrants who are leaving their country. I mean, in Colombia, where we're portrayed as robbers and prostitutes, it's a tough situation to be in.” (Andrea: p.8, l.15)

## Polarization

While coding our interviews we came to discover that social classes were depicted as one of the causes for the crisis. Our interviewees, who were highly educated middle class citizens, argued there had been a polarization of the population even before Chavez. The Bolivarian revolution had divided the people between working class and middle class where Hugo Chavez was a leader of the laborers. One of our interviewees believed Chavez had neglected the middle class and the well-educated citizens of Venezuela who felt they were better off in other countries which led to the severe brain drain. Looking at class stratification we tried to understand if the population was divided by political belief and or support of either Maduro or the opposition. We came to discover that our interviewees were exhausted from ridiculous populism from both sides of the political spectrum, but if they were to choose they would support Juan Guaido of the opposition. Our preliminary idea was that the laborers would to a certain extent support Maduro because of his close relationship with Chavez and their shared political ideology. However, most of the population are fed up with national politics according to our interviews. One of our interviewees described the class stratification as increasing when Chavez was elected:

*“There's just a difference in classes, which I think also Chavez. I mean, it has always existed. But Chávez during his government really highlighted it like. And how the poor people maybe have been ignored for a long time, and that caused some sort of social resentment between classes. And so I also think that that social resentment keeps us divided as well.” (Desirée, p.5, l.7)*

As argued, the laborers felt angry and upset because they felt forgotten during his predecessor and thought the middle class had gotten prioritized. She argues this is still visible in the population and their intern views on one another

The relevant codes used in this theme are brain drain, social resentment and division. Through our coding we came to discover that the social classes in Venezuela had been divided during this crisis. According to our interviewees, the social resentment started when many of the middle class citizens decided to move from Venezuela and the working class were left behind with this enormous crisis. As spoken by our interviewee, the brain drain caused a severe division between the social layers of the Venezuelan society.

### **Inadequate leadership**

In relation to the social classes in Venezuela, we get from the interviews that since the escalation of this crisis, the middle class have disappeared and there is now only poverty and on the other side Maduro's people. This scarcity we have seen in Venezuela is believed to have pushed the middle class further out of the society. We can also see that from our four interviews, three of the interviewees have moved out of Venezuela to pursue better lives, while the fourth is figuring out how he can escape. Another thing we understood from coding the interviews, was that the people who stayed in Venezuela felt abandoned by the middle class citizens who were able to move and get financial security somewhere else with their education. From our four interviews we see there is a clear pattern in the view towards the government. There are several arguments that point towards Maduro's mismanagement of a state, nepotism and corrupt practices to promote his or his allies interests while neglecting the crisis:

*“And just poor management of every resource that we have available in our country. I know It's easy to blame the government, but I would say a big part of the blame lies in the government because they're corrupt and you see that they're the richest people in the country while the rest of the people are eating food out of the trash cans. This is something that in my lifetime I have never seen anywhere. We've always had corrupt governments, but never to this extent.” (Andrea : p.4, l. 36 )*

Through our research we came to understand from the interviewees that the generation of Chavistas is decreasing because they feel mistrust to Maduro for his

corruption and mismanagement of what was formerly a state they gladly identified with.

The relevant codes used for this theme are poverty, mismanagement and corruption. Corruption is a code that is repeated numerous times by our different interviewees. It seems our interviewees have been somewhat used to corruption in Venezuela in daily life, but there was clear consensus that the corruption has gotten out of hand in the reign of Maduro, which is something that keeps them from returning to Venezuela to stay.

## **Media access**

In terms of the Venezuelans' access to reliable media and news sources, we came to understand that Twitter is a very common outlet for news for Venezuelans, because they can read news from around the world, and the independent media platforms in Venezuela are being either shut down by Maduro or sanctioned by him according to our interviewees. There had been a case paper shortage for all the media outlets except the government controlled:

*“The government is not giving resources to private media to keep on printing and the lack of paper and the lack of resources hurts the independent media in Venezuela. So that has been intentional, you know, to provide news themselves. They are exploiting their power this way.. “ (Jose, p.3. l.5)*

According to our interviewee Jose, the government exploits its power to ensure independent media is difficult to print and difficult to access so the population will get their news from the official government news paper that praises the president rather than the critical media that blame him.

The relevant codes in this theme are twitter, exploitation, and populism . These codes were repeated in some of the interviews which is why we wanted to further investigate them. According to our interviewees, Twitter is the most accessible media in Venezuela, and official government media cannot be trusted.

## Government VS Opposition

During Maduro's tenure, the leader of the opposition Juan Guaidó has been acknowledged by several western countries as the legitimate leader of Venezuela. What we wanted to ask with these questions was if there is a big difference in the people who support the government and the opposition, and how big a deal it would be if it was one or the other. Our interviewees generally had lost interest in national politics in Venezuela because they felt whoever they supported, they would be let down. As this topic of class stratification keeps returning, it was interesting to see if there were any class related reasons for who supported whom. We came to understand that our middle class interviewees would prefer to stand with Guaidó in spite of his lack of experience. One of the interviewees compared the two leaders and their supporters and said neither could be trusted entirely because they have a personal belief system and rather than giving objective information they use their media to promote themselves with populism.

*"No, no, I mean. It depends a lot on who you read, I guess it's like I said, I don't go into the government websites to read the news, right. Because I know that they only have one side of the story. But when you also go to an opposition newspaper, they also have only one side of the story. Neither of them can really be trusted" (Desirée : p.3, l. 28)*

It can be deduced from this quote that the people have a difficult time figuring out who to support and what policies are legitimate and what policies are populist that primarily benefit the interest of themselves, Maduro and Guaidó.

The relevant codes in this theme were bias, endlessness and mistrust. Generally the interviewees' perception of the government and the opposition was negative. They had difficulties separating legitimate and illegitimate news and facts stated by the officials. The interviewees believed that neither of the two could be trusted fully.

## Private Versus Public

When asked about the private sector versus the public sector, the answers from our interviewees were very similar. Particularly Desirée has strong emotions when asked this, she argues the private sector has taken big damage during the crisis, especially since the inauguration of Maduro:

*“There's a fear from the private companies or private industry to invest in a country where there is uncertainty if your company will be nationalized. Right. Like back in time of course, there were private investments and international companies invested in Venezuela but then the government decided to either expropriate or take it from the private company, right? They make it a part of it, like a part of the government.”*  
(Desirée, p.5, l. 40)

Desirée argues foreign investment from private businesses in Venezuela has decreased because Maduro, according to our interviewee, commonly exploits his power to nationalize private companies. This is of course not very appealing for foreign investments which is why many companies have relocated to neighboring countries in the region.

The relevant codes in this theme are distress, uncertainty and nationalization. As stated by the interviewees, Venezuela was formerly a popular destination for foreign business companies to set base in the latin american region. Unfortunately as they argue, most of these international corporations have moved out of Venezuela because of the uncertainty with the currency and the government nationalizing companies.

## Scarcity

One of the biggest challenges for the Venezuelan population during this overshadowing crisis has been scarcity. It has been very difficult to access medication, food, drinks and resources. According to our interviews it goes beyond that, as the currency has inflated to a dizzying heights where a cup of coffee costs 5

million bolivar. Dollars have mostly replaced the currency, but is still difficult to get a hold of:

*“It is difficult. But it is hard to get change from lets say a 20 dollar bill. You have to have the right amount of money otherwise you don’t get money back because there isn’t any.” (Jose: p.5, l.43)*

As Jose argues, it is difficult to understand the situation in Venezuela economically speaking because of the devaluation of the currency. Having a currency with next to zero value guarantees scarcity and general shortage of goods. Our interviewees portrayed the overshadowing scarcity in Venezuela as a part of the new life the citizens have gotten during this crisis. There have been mentions of some people having to eat from trash cans and that a market for expired foods has surfaced.

## **Discussion of our findings**

Throughout our research we discovered information beyond our intended expectations; particularly on the ideological front of implementation of socialist ideals according to Marx and Chavez. Although Chavez was an outspoken socialist and fervent supporter of the Marxist school such as Fidel Castro’s Cuba and the now defunct Soviet Union, he was adeptly vociferous in his demarcation of classic Marxist ideology and his own fiery brand of Bolivarian Socialist Revolution. While Marx concluded that a revolution by the proletariat -the majority- was not only necessary but indeed inevitably and subsequently followed by the abolition of private property and inheritance rights. (Marx and Friedrichs, 2010, ). Chavez implemented a wholly different approach that curtailed a more confrontational rhetoric that rejected all principles of what he described as imperialistic neoliberal policies.

Hugo Chavez had shown a keen interest for the plight of the working class (the proletariat) and the exorbitant inequalities in Venezuela since the beginning of his political career and was quick to display it through a populist message the people were quick to embrace.

Certainly, some of these positive changes in Venezuela can be attributed to the plethora of anti-neoliberal social programs geared towards helping the country's most in need, most notably the country's community-based social 'missions' in areas including health care and education. (Larrabure, 178).

This is something that former president Hugo Chavez was acutely familiar with, as the lower social class, long ostracized and neglected by the ruling elites, was the intended target of his populist message and fought fervently to provide an outlet for them; Chávez government's rhetorical privileging of the knowledge and cultural production of the poor was accompanied by efforts to challenge the approach of already existing state media outlets and to put the means of broadcasting in the hands of people from historically disenfranchised communities (Schiller, 2018: p. 127).

Furthermore, segregation and class stratification has been a major characteristic of the country's infrastructure as well; with landmarks such as the underground system (metro), motor highways, shopping centers serving as the unofficial de facto lines of socio-spatial segregation; on one side upper-middle class juxtaposed by unofficial or illegal settlements for the working class (Arturo, 2017, 630).

As such, Chavez positioned this Marxist theory as a fundamental part for the implementation of his Bolivarian revolution and the need to regulate class conflict between the bourgeoisie and the working class, while at the same time pursuing a high degree of autonomy for the implementation of economic policies and the long term survival of the system (Ellner, 2017, 34).

Such a message, accompanied by favorite policies directed to the less privileged working class continued to earn him supporters and the results began to be noticeable to this subjugated class; the household poverty rate began to decline sharply, reaching a low 42.8% (Weisbrot et al., 814). Encouraged by positive numbers and rise in popularity among the working class and backed by oil wealth, Chavez continued to address the issues of class conflict by implementing a series of programs established to provide health care for the poor, subsidized food, as well as increased access to education. To put this in perspective an estimated 14.5 million people, approximately 54 percent of the population, received access to free health care. An estimated 40 to 47 percent of the population (around 10.7 to 12.5 million



people) were able to purchase subsidized food through a program called Mercall, all at discounts averaging 41 to 44 percent. (Ibid, 817).

This process, and its origins, was not unknown to the society in general as our interviewees are conscious enough about the ongoing class conflict and its detrimental effects in society, acknowledging in some part that long existing hierarchies and segregation had been, to some degree, a driving factor for the situation in Venezuela (Lorena, 27:37).

We must point out, however, that his 21st century socialist Bolivarian policies extended well beyond the scope of social services and social spending. Chavez intended for the state to have a more direct and protagonist involvement through community and class participation; aiming to create what is considered human development through popular-economy initiatives, and the importance of building popular power through the state, rather than by ignoring or fighting against it. (Ibid, 177). Unlike classic Marxist theory which seeks to eradicate one minority class for the benefit of a disenfranchised majority.

Although at first glance it may appear to the uninitiated that Chavez's Socialist Bolivarian revolution had achieved a utopian transitional harmony between social classes, it is paramount to note that it certainly is not the case as our interviewees provided insight into how the implementation of the aforementioned policies impacted the social balance in a way akin to Marx's clash and revolt of classes. As the position of the disenfranchised working class improved this created a rift between them and the decreasing middle-class, leading to clashes in a society that had long been divided by class and status, where the hierarchical lines had been established (Desiree p.5, L.17-19).

Another one of our participants, Andrea, further expands upon this class paradigm, in which she ascertains the de facto class margins that had existed prior to the Chavez Bolivarian Revolution; lower-class people such as the street vendor, the help at home (nanny, maid) were immediately assumed to be economic migrants from poorer countries such as Haiti, The Dominican Republic and even Colombia. It was an unspoken thought but still very clearly and culturally marked class line that became blurred once Chavez's socialist policies increased.(Lorena).

The work of Maya (2018) reflects several of the themes that we extracted from our interviews. Our interviewees all argued that state corruption had disrupted the country of Venezuela for far too long. Margarita Maya argues in her article *“Populism, 21st-century socialism and corruption in Venezuela”* that Maduro’s management post Chavez has led the country to misery with his authoritarian practice of power. In particular she argues Maduro practices neopatrimonial domination (Maya, 2018) which means the boundaries between the public and private are not defined, as the ruler can benefit from public goods as if they belonged to them. In relation to our answers from the interviews, this correlates well with what the interviewees formulated, especially what José said:

*“The government is not giving resources to private media to keep on printing and the lack of paper and the lack of resources hurts the independent media outlets in Venezuela. So that has been intentional, you know, to provide news themselves. They (The government red.) are exploiting their power this way..” (Jose, p.3, l.5)*

As José states, the government has been taking advantage of its powers through neopatrimonialism domination as they have kept resources from the public to benefit their own political agenda. There are no direct boundaries between the public sector and the private which goes to show the way Maduro practices power. Extensively we discovered from our interviews, that foreign businesses have very little interest in investing in Venezuela and its resources, because there are no legitimate policies that restrain Maduro and his government from interfering. The studies of Maya show that nepotism and corruption have been a common phenomenon in Venezuela even before Maduro when Chavez was president. During Chavez’s tenure, neopatrimonialism was first seen when he founded a currency exchange system where the profits from state oil production were laundered so they could benefit his personal allies, the civilian and military ruling elites:

*“The lack of institutional checks and balances, along with a governing style based on familial ties, cronyism and clientelism, has made exchange rate illicit arrangements an extremely attractive mechanism for distributing oil revenues to the military and*

*civilian ruling elites (who are a large share of a wealthy ‘Bolivarian bourgeoisie’ or ‘Bolígarchs’)*”. (Maya, 2018, 8)

What needs to be understood as the overshadowing difference between Chavez and Maduro was the charismatic level of Chavez who knew how to speak to the laborers to earn their trust. It was easier for Chavez to get away with neopatrimonialism because he was generally appreciated by the population. It is inevitable to say that the crisis was less comprehensive when Chavez was the president, but the Venezuelan population gave Chavez illegitimate policy makings: “Due to his lack of charisma, he has resorted to greater coercion and militarization to gain authority, even abolishing the right to fair and transparent elections.” (Maya, 2018: 5) As Maya argues, the charisma of Chavez was crucial for his progression to power.

Simultaneously our interviewee Desirée stated:

“I listen to Chavez’s old speeches sometimes. I mean, the theory sounds great, like the idea sounds great. But the reality is that that’s not what is happening. In many of the cases it’s just pure populism. Like he was just telling what people wanted to hear, but not really acting on it.”(Desirée, p.6, l.20)

We can understand from the two quotes that the charisma of Chavez was an important force in his political campaign, and from what Desirée said, it can be interpreted that he used his charisma in a very manipulative manner, to produce populist policies that could get him support. If Maduro had not been directly chosen by Chavez to become his predecessor, it is unlikely he would have been elected because of his lack of charisma. The answers from our interviews also portray the public misery with Maduro because of his authoritarian strategies of governance.

As Marx and Friedrichs (2010) argues in the communist manifesto, there are two social classes, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. He argues that crisis is inevitable in a capitalist system, because the proletariat will eventually revolutionize and change the power dynamics.

In Venezuela prior to Chavez’ reign, the bourgeoisie and proletariat could be translated to the working class and the middle class. As the working class had felt

neglected for years up until the Bolivarian revolution. The revolution was redemption for the working class who Chavez promised to be the leader of. In his strategy, he neglected the middle class because of the magnitude of the laborers which was difficult for the middle class:

*“There's just a difference in classes, which I think also Chavez. I mean, it has always existed. But Chávez during his government really highlighted it like. And how the poor people maybe have been ignored for a long time, and that caused some sort of social resentment between classes. And so I also think that that social resentment keeps us divided as well.” (Desirée, p.5, l.17)*

What Chavez did with the Bolivarian revolution was change the power dynamics and the social classes. This meant that what was formerly bourgeoisie became the proletariat and vice versa. Chavez fired the talented citizens from their positions in PDVSA in order for laborers to replace them. This was also what led to the severe brain drain that expanded the social gap. The polarization of the people worsened when Maduro was elected for power, the laborers became the proletariat again because Maduro focused more on maintaining a relationship with the wealthiest citizens as well as the military. They became the bourgeoisie and the laborers the proletariat. This increased the polarization of the people because the middle class left Venezuela, but the laborers were unable to do so.

## Discussion part II

In the second part of our discussion, we will analyze and discuss the impact and consequences the Venezuelan crisis has had on the Venezuelans personal identity, through the lens of the social stratification theory of Max Weber. The different interviewees explained different factors of uncertainty and inequality among the population, in relation to their explanation of leaving or planning to leave the country. As mentioned, in relation to the class structure, it was evident that one of the most dominant changes of the state of the country was related to the transformation of the class structure. In terms of the differentiation in the Venezuelan class structure, and the elimination of different social classes, there has been an increased number of Venezuelans belonging to the same class, the proletariat. As so it has brought with it, that there has been a change in the social statuses among the Venezuelans. As

previously mentioned, the social statuses, according to Weber, are independent from the economic situation of the individuals but often it has a connection to the economics in one way or another. This is evident in the case of an ever increasing part of the Venezuelan people being put in the same social class all together, as there has been a diminished differentiation of the economic status in the population. As such it has brought some differences in the social statuses among the Venezuelans, despite them being put into the same social class. Throughout the interviews, it was evident that our participants felt that their social status has changed since the Venezuelan crisis has worsened. Lorena stated that she felt a transformation, regarding her social status, when the class structure differed:

“I grew up as middle class in Venezuela and had so many more opportunities, which is the ones that the working class hated the most and the way we grew up within this context. When election time came, and the class structure changed the working class people who were those you kind of stepped on the most and now that they have the opportunity, they want to take the opportunity away from you because in its moment you could have offered the opportunity to that person instead of stepping on him or her do you know? I think the cultural theme affected us immensely, it affected us as citizens and now we are portrayed differently as there is not the same economic difference between us as with the former class structure. The former people of the working class in Venezuela don't treat us equally, despite the fact that we are in the same troubling situation.” (Lorena, p.4, l.7).

In the example of the interview with Lorena, she clearly indicates that the former working class in Venezuela, felt treated unfairly compared to the upper and middle classes, and that they have kept the anger related to it. As the former middle class in Venezuela has been diminished economically, and been put into the same class, as the working-class citizens, it hasn't changed the group of former working-class citizens' view upon them. The group of former working-class Venezuelans, on the other hand regard the former middle-class citizens, as belonging in a lower social status, as they previously were wealthier than them, and now are in the same economical state. Thereby it is arguable, that the diminishing of the class structure, has brought a differentiation in social statuses among the same social class in

Venezuela. In relation to the brain drain of the Venezuelan people, the distinction of social status among the social classes, could arguably also be a contributive factor.

In terms of the expat Venezuelans, they have in different situations also been regarded with a lower social status among different environments. An example of that is seen in the view among the population who stayed in Venezuela. Andrea for example states that now: “then there's the discourse of the people who stayed: “And so you didn't you didn't stay and fight for your country.” So, there's a bit of a guilty feeling, so it's frustration, guilt and hopelessness. (Andrea: p.9, l.34). According to Andrea, the Venezuelans living in Venezuela sees the expat Venezuelans as less honorable and cowards for fleeing and thereby they have been put in to a lower social status than the Venezuelans in Venezuela. This has caused a shift in the social statuses among the Venezuelan people, as the ones remaining in Venezuela, regard themselves as more honorable than the ones who left, for a better living. As it is also evident in several examples in the interviewees we conducted, that there is a common feeling of guilt, it is also arguable that it has entailed that the expat Venezuelans feel less honorable than the present living Venezuelans despite, they only fled accordingly to the interviewees, to secure a better and more secure life for themselves and their families.

On the other hand, arguably more comprehensively has the Venezuelan crisis had a massive impact on the social status of the expat Venezuelans living in foreign countries. When the Venezuelans move to foreign countries in regards to obtaining a better standard of living, they will still bring the identity of being a Venezuelan with them. The Venezuelan crisis has caused a shift in how Venezuelans get portrayed by other countries, notably in other countries in South America.

A clear example of this is exemplified by Andrea, who states that:

“I think we are now seen as a horrible country in all of South America. I mean, my dad, he's originally from Chile. So I travel every now and then to Chile to see my family there on my dad's side of the family, and to be honest, people ask me sometimes like, oh, where are you from? And I'm like, I'm a bit hesitant to say Venezuela, because we're seeing, like, these horrible immigrants who are leaving their country. I mean, in Colombia, where we're portrayed as robbers and prostitutes,

it's a tough situation to be in. And a lot of the people, a lot of the countries where Venezuelans are migrating in South America, they don't want us. They don't want us there. They're like, no, no, no, we don't want these people here.” (Andrea, p.8, l. 17)

In relation to the worsened crisis, and the huge impact it has had on the exodus of the Venezuelan people, it has also changed the social status of Venezuelans in foreign countries. In connection with the huge exodus of Venezuelans, there has also been a lot of Venezuelans bringing crime to the country. As Maya also states: “The country is also increasingly seen as a criminal state, run by groups and mafias dedicated to drug and human trafficking, money laundering, gold and arms smuggling, among other illicit businesses.” (Maya, 2018, 5). Statistics furthermore show that the two Colombian states neighboring Venezuela, La Guajira and Norte de Santander, have the highest number of Venezuelans by percentage, each having between 7.5-10 percent of their total population. At the same time, have the Venezuelans been accountable for more than 20 percent of all the crimes in the two states (Migration Policy Institute, 2020). As Andrea indicates in the previously mentioned example, the increased crime rate related to Venezuelans and the worsening state of Venezuela, changed the social status of Venezuelans in Colombia. And as it is implied in her use of the word “now”, Venezuelans used to have a higher social status, which is the opposite of the way they are portrayed now. It is arguable, that the huge exodus of Venezuelans to their neighboring countries, has entailed that the migrant Venezuelans is regarded with a lower social status in, living in other countries. This has a huge impact on the Venezuelans, as most Venezuelans moving to other countries, in the attempt to achieve a life under better circumstances, settle down in neighboring and other South American countries. This will predominantly result in, due to their identity as a Venezuelan, that they will be regarded as belonging to a lower social status.

## Conclusion

In order to adequately answer our problem formulation: “How has the socio-economic crisis and the Bolivarian revolution affected the class structures in Venezuela and how has it caused a shift in the identity of the Venezuelan individuals?”. We have come to the conclusion:

Our research shed light on a variety of issues that we had not previously anticipated. Firstly, we ought to acknowledge that our theoretical approach, of using Karl Marx’s class conflict theory, that all conflicts are class related, arguably holds true for our research, as our study strongly indicates that Venezuela’s socio-economic crisis stems from decades old neglect from a ruling elite class towards a less prosperous disenfranchised working class. Thus resulting in the eventual election of a populist candidate with a strong classicist rhetoric, offering a better alternative to their demands, eventually pitting one class versus the other. Chavez’s Socialist Bolivarian revolution deviated from traditional Marxist doctrine by expropriating national resources and industry while at the same time increasing public spending on a plethora of social services and projects aimed towards his political base, simultaneously implementing a humanistic approach towards the working class (proletariat). The over-reliance of Venezuela’s economy on petro dollars and oil revenues created a fragile economy, unsustainable in the long term, bound to come down crashing as soon as oil prices dropped.

Hyper-inflation and wide-spread scarcity followed after the collapse of government institutions led to a record mass exodus of Venezuelans abroad in search of a better life.

The mass flight of human capital has led to record levels of “brain drain”, highly skilled and educated Venezuelans leaving the country, bringing with them their knowledge and expertise, potentially prolonging Venezuela’s recovery effort by decades due to a shortage of skilled workers for Venezuela’s traditional industries; oil, mining and farming.



Class conflict and polarization within Venezuela became more ingrained within the people, as the former upper middle class was demonized, seen as traitors for abandoning their country and blamed for decades of neglect and abuse.

The severity of the Venezuelan crisis created a vast array of unexpected, intangible consequences on the Venezuelan psyche, as demonstrated and explained by our interviewees; ranging from a sense of shock and mental fatigue in regards to the crisis, trying to tune it out or distancing from it, due to a sense of hopelessness, impotence, and frustration. Additionally, their cultural identity, attachment to their homeland was shaken due to the stigma attached to those who migrated to other countries because of the crisis.

Furthermore, the separation of families created a generational chasm as those who could flee, usually a younger generation, do not see themselves returning to their homeland as that will, in their opinion, take decades, and life will continue for them abroad as it does for those at home.

In terms of the effects of the Venezuelan crisis and the Bolivarian revolution, it is arguable that it has had a comprehensive impact on the identity of Venezuelan people. Arguably the Bolivarian revolution, brought up by Chavez, has caused a shift in the social status among the population in Venezuela. One might say that Chavez's promotion of the working-class citizens resulted in the middle-class citizens receiving a lower social status compared to the working class.

Furthermore, we could argue that, as the Venezuelan crisis has worsened, the interconnection between social status and social classes in Venezuela has diminished, since the crisis has eliminated the middle-class. As the eradication of the middle-class has resulted in former middle-class Venezuelans has been demoted to the working class, but on the other hand maintained their social status, it has created a new environment for the social statuses in Venezuela. Whereas the former middle-class Venezuelans are being regarded with a lower social status despite the fact that they are in the same social class.

Another consequence the crisis arguably has had on the identity of the Venezuelans, related to the immigrant Venezuelans, is that the expat Venezuelans have been regarded as dishonorable for leaving the country and thereby received a lower social status in order to pursue to receive a higher social class in a foreign country.

Notably related to the effects on the immigrant Venezuelans identities, it can be deduced that the Venezuelan individuals have been regarded with a lower social status in the neighboring South American countries. The neighboring countries have changed their view on the Venezuelan individuals as a consequence of the increased crime rate related to the immigration of the Venezuelan in neighboring countries.

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